

**Intervention of H.E. Prak Sokhonn,
Deputy Prime Minister,
Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
at the High-Level Segment of the 40th Session of the Human Rights Council
Geneva, 25 February 2019**

Mr. President,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour for me to address the Human Rights Council. The work of this august body, whose noble aim is enshrined in the UN Charter, deserves the respect from us all.

Mr. President

I have no lessons to share except those of my own country, Cambodia. Today I find that my country, Cambodia, is at a crossroads of regrettably divergent perceptions. To many, they see Cambodia as the “success story” of a devastated country, burned to the ground by war and genocide, that has risen from the ashes, reconciled amongst their own people, and achieved enormous socio-economic transformations. Unfortunately to a few others, they only want to see in my country the shortcomings in the values of a perfect democracy, an exemplary democracy I may say, that even their own countries couldn’t hope to achieve.

In fact, this year marks the 40th anniversary of the end of Pol Pot’s genocidal regime. It is thus a fitting moment for us to remember and remind the world of where we came from. After almost four years in power, more than 2 million Cambodians have perished in the hand of this brutal regime, out of a total population of 7.2 million living in 1975. Those victims were mainly the urban residents, mostly the educated ones. In 1979, Cambodia was a devastated country, with no road, no bridge, no school, no hospital, no administrative services, no money, no religion, no state. As for its people, they were traumatized and exhausted survivors, totally stripped of everything, for having outlived the misery of several deportations.

It was to these very same survivors that a majority of UN member states have decided to impose on them a total embargo while allowing the Khmer Rouge executioners to occupy the Cambodian seat in the UN. These same governments that preached incessantly about democracy and human rights were the ones that have deprived the entire surviving people access to food, health, education, housing, development and even peace for 12 long years!

This is the context of where we came from.

The fact that Cambodia has attained a lower middle-income country status nowadays is largely attributed to the peace secured by our Prime Minister under his national reconciliation

win-win policy, five years after the departure of the United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia.

Throughout these years of reconstruction, all the rights enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, such as the right to food, health, education, culture, housing, and work, have never ceased to be the priorities of our government. All these significant progresses can be attested by all international organizations working in our country. Our economy grew at an impressive rate of 7 percent in the last two decades making Cambodia the 6th fastest economy in the world, our poverty rate was dramatically reduced to less than 10%, while our primary education rate has reached a record high of 98%. Our life expectancy has increased from a low 54 years in 1993 to 69 years in 2016. As far as the Millennium Development Goals are concerned, Cambodia has achieved most of the goals, well ahead of schedule. From being a recipient-state of PKO forces, Cambodia became a dispatching-state to UN peacekeeping missions, deploying since 2006 nearly 6,000 troops to eight countries in Africa and the Middle East.

Unfortunately, all these achievements, and many more of them, were hardly reflected in the various reports submitted to this Council and, as a result, criticisms quite prejudicial of our government continue unabated on the basis of partial and biased information. Their information is generated from practically the same sources: the political opposition and some local or foreign NGOs driven by their own political agenda.

Speaking of partiality, it should be noted that those reports so critical of the government have rarely denounced a political opposition's practices that, for all intent and purposes, are in blatant violation of the values underlying democracy and human rights, such as defamation and serious slander of our leaders, systematic appeals to racial hatred and xenophobia, production of false documents, provocations endangering our relations with a neighboring state, delegitimization of our institutions, repeated calls for the sedition of our armed forces. All these acts have the compounding effect of creating a constant atmosphere of civil war.

Serious violations of laws that are identical to those found in Western countries are not even mentioned. I can cite for your reference violations of the ban on foreign financing of political parties, violation of the law on associations, refusal to comply with our codes the provisions of which were drafted with the assistance of Western academics. Without fail, these reports referred to our court decisions as "politically motivated", whereas they are the same as those rendered by Western jurisdictions, based on similar facts and in similar circumstances. That's how we're being treated.

Now, allow me to touch on a number of provisions of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and highlight for the benefit of the Council how they are respected in Cambodia:

While so many countries are torn apart by religious conflicts, religious freedom and interfaith tolerance are common manifestations in our daily lives. Quite obviously, the majority of our

population are Buddhists, but there is as well a vibrant Muslim minority, not to mention the existence of different Christian denominations who are very active and well respected.

With respect to freedom of expressions and opinions, this is once again a gross misrepresentation of what is portrayed abroad: There are numerous opposition newspapers in English and Khmer languages; publications critical of the country's leadership are freely sold in bookstores; radio stations, some broadcasting from abroad, aired partisan information on a daily basis; access to social networks is completely free throughout the country. Equal treatment vis-à-vis tax obligations and respect for ethical rules are legal constraints not only in Cambodia but as well in Western countries. These criticisms from the West are never-ending, and all in the name of freedom of expression. In fact, quite ironically, some even criticize us for wanting to protect the inviolability of our King!

When the leader of an opposition party publicly declared that he and his party have received financial and technical support from a foreign power to overthrow through illegal means a legitimately and democratically elected government, we have no choice but to take the necessary steps to protect our country's institutions, peace and stability.

The Australian delegation mentioned at this session last year that "The rule of law is fundamental to ensuring all are equal before our system of justice". That is exactly the same principle that we are applying here.

Presently, after taking these protective measures, we endeavor to negotiate with those who are ready to support a peaceful democracy, those true opposition people, to find ways to reconcile our democracy with political stability, political pluralism and public peace. To this end, we have taken legislative actions to allow the 118 leaders of the former opposition party to be fully reintegrated into the political life. The government has also put in place a consultative mechanism with civil society, and I personally have initiated a regular dialogue with foreign NGOs on January 29.

Mr President,

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

A few months ago, we have renewed for another two years the mandate of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Phnom Penh making Cambodia the only country in Asia to have such mechanism. We continue to welcome the visits and the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur. Last month, a Cambodian delegation participated in the Universal Periodic Review, where they took the opportunity to inform the Council on the concrete measures taken by our government to strengthen democracy, the rule of law and human rights. I would like to reiterate the appreciation of our delegation to all the countries that offered us, in good faith, their comments and recommendations.

I would like to conclude quite simply by repeating what our Prime Minister, Samdech Techo Hun Sen, has recently told the High Commissioner for Human Rights Madam Michelle Bachelet

Delivered Version

that Cambodia is committed to promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law, but also to protecting our so hard-won peace, a peace that is so cherished by a people whose tragic past you all know well.

I thank you for your attention and I wish a successful deliberation.